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Building codes: mapping technology and tradition

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BUILDING CODES:
MAPPING TECHNOLOGY AND TRADITION

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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requirements for the degree of
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in

The School of Art

by
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B.A., Mississippi College, 1999
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the crossroads between printmaking and digital technology as our culture shifts towards a more digital media focused existence. As technology shifts art-making more and more away from the analog creation process towards a more digitally mediated one, printmaking's history stands out among other traditional mediums as well-suited to embrace the transition whole-heartedly. By using the analogies of the matrix, the map, and the building, this body of work creates a bridge from the historical and time-tested approaches of printmaking towards the future of the art form: a chimera of technology and tradition.

BUILDING CODES: MAPPING TECHNOLOGY AND TRADITION

When I was ten years old my father came home from Radio Shack with a beautiful new Tandy 1000 computer. It cost around a thousand dollars and was less powerful than the cell phone I currently have in my pocket. At the time it was a toy for me, nothing more than a device you could use to make ASCII art and write reports for school. In the following years, a friend whose parents were contractors for the government, had this odd device that would cradle their phone receiver and allowed them to dial into other people's computers. Little did we know then how big the internet would become. Other than establishing the beginning of the constant presence of digital technology in my life, this ugly beige box also introduced me to the possibility of becoming someone else through the playing of computer games. As I walked around the royal kingdom of Daventry (from the game series King's Quest, the first 3-D computer adventure game) slaying dragons and accomplishing quests, life outside of my small town became exciting, even if this existence was virtual and portrayed in 8-bit graphics. These early experiences presented me with the first opportunity to realize the aesthetics of the digital world, as well as the ability to inhabit in both digital and analog spaces simultaneously. This experience, one that started out simply as play, has turned into a much more sophisticated and constant part of my life, moving from simply leisure activities to mainstream forms of communication and even primary ways in which I think about creating my own artwork.

If my parents hadn't been so intent on limiting my computer time, seeing it simply as a toy or an appliance, perhaps I would have learned to code earlier in life. At the same time that I was learning about computers, I was developing an interest in art, which to my parents was apparently a more acceptable use of my time. This early interest in art evolved over the years

into a love of printmaking. The use of matrices to print, the physicality of the different methods of printing, learning the numerous processes and “languages” of the different mediums: all of these things appealed to my creative impulses.

These two seemingly unrelated interests of mine, printmaking and computer technology, developed independently of each other for years, or so I thought. Media scholars have theorized some of the ways in which the technological shift, especially the increasing ubiquity of the mass media, has influenced members of my generation. Even Marshall McLuhan, writing some fifty years ago, argued that the "electronic age" ushered in a new psyche: “We see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness” (63). According to McLuhan and others who followed him, my early and ongoing exposure to computing technology and the subsequent digitization of the world around me was influencing the art that I made, or more importantly, the way my brain was wired and processed information, even on a subconscious level. As I have been thinking about this shift, both by watching how quickly the image-heavy digital culture has become the norm, as well as by studying how contemporary artists are using these new technologies to speak to audiences in a unique way, I started asking questions about how and in what way, as a printmaker, I would negotiate these changing forms of expression.

Printmaking as an art form may seem at first glance to be at odds with new technologies; after all, some printmaking techniques utilize processes developed hundreds or even thousands of years ago. However, a brief exploration of the original impetus behind the history of print processes reveals that the two are more connected than one might think. From Gutenberg's bibles to Warhol's Monroe silkscreens, print media have from the outset been used to disseminate

information and images, much like the digital technologies of today. At a recent panel discussion on the convergence of print and technology, Kevin Haas, professor of printmaking at Washington State University, articulated the connection between the two histories this way:

The trajectory of technology and communication has been to disseminate information to ever greater numbers at greater speeds while simultaneously putting these means within everyone's reach. Without moveable type and 550 years of page design and typography, we wouldn't be sitting at computers using Microsoft Word and Adobe InDesign with personal inkjet printers attached. Our desire to communicate images and words, especially with technology, is seemingly insatiable. When viewed this way, the woodcut, the telegraph, and the cellphone camera, don't seem that different in that they all fulfill a similar impulse in different ways. All came into widespread use when not only was the technology mastered, but when they were seen as socially acceptable and needed means of communication.

Following this logic, one could argue that digital technology is a direct descendant of print media, the mass media of its day, and that it could be considered a form of printmaking. It is in this spirit that I interpret the world of print from its 14th century origins to 21st century technology. Furthermore, I see modern printmakers uniquely situated to make use of digital technologies in the making of art. Bringing these two forms of communication together—the old and the new, the established and the upstart—only enhances the potential of exploring how they can work together to become more than the sum of their parts; an artistic collage.

We are in the midst of a global technology shift, the implications of which are not yet completely apparent. Clay Shirky, internet scholar and consultant, has called this shift nothing short of a “revolution in human affairs” (20), arguing that “when we change the way we communicate, we change society” (17). Because this technological revolution is still in process, the communication variables Shirky alludes to (Twitter, personal blogs, text messaging, Flickr, etc.) are constantly evolving. As a member of the first generation of Americans to be exposed to digital technologies for the majority of my life, this constant evolution has been both a normal

and expected part of my existence. I see my generation uniquely situated to speak to the nature of this evolution, as we have experienced both worlds. The translation of consciousness that McLuhan describes and the communications revolution that Shirky speaks of, have created a hybrid historical space, where the world is not yet completely digitized but is slowly moving away from dependence on analog technologies. These shifts in consciousness, this digitization of thought, this hybridity is the impetus behind the work I have created in *Building Codes: Mapping Technology and Tradition*.

In order to explore the nature of this shift and to represent how the old and the new are interacting with one another, I have used a combination of traditional print processes and digital media to create a series of hand-pulled works on paper as well as computer-generated projections. All of the works in the show, both digital and traditional prints, appear in pairs according to their respective mediums, in order to mirror the base-2 number system, otherwise known as binary code, which implements only the numerals 0 and 1 (Fig.1). To further emphasize this digital language, pieces of binary code appear in the prints themselves. The main imagery of the prints, however, derives from a visual vocabulary centered around how the language of architecture and geography has been appropriated by the computer world. The concepts of a “web” or “grid” of computers, the “architecture” of a database, a site “map,” computer “languages,” opening and closing “windows”: all these words elicit very concrete images that make up the basis for the major symbols that appear throughout the show.

All of the traditional prints started out in the same manner, as blank screens in the program GIMP, an open-source image editing program created and maintained by volunteers. Even the large woodcuts, the most traditional of the print methods used, began their existence as

digital information. The choice to print these images by hand is an intentional one, speaking to the value I still place on the creation of objects, while the imagery speaks with the visual elements evident in the modern digital world. I designed each print like a structure, starting with a concept, laying down a foundation, and building up layers from there all the way up to the clear plexiglass. For example, in the prints *Chiba City I & II*, even the surface of the plexiglass that encloses the image becomes activated, symbolizing the presence of a screen or a mediating surface through which the images travel in order to be experienced (Fig. 2).

It was important for me to think of these prints as built spaces that include architectural elements, buildings and urban geographies. These images are both from photos of local structures (focusing on structural pattern and rhythm) as well as images of the famous Shinjuku district of Japan, known for its population density as well as for its large amount of technology vendors. The specificity of this particular architecture is of less importance than the built structures' ability to represent generalized markers of modern industrialization. The city of Tamara, in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972), acts as inspiration. Calvino describes it this way: "The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things. . .however the city may really be, beneath this coating of signs whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it" (13). The places I construct are meant to remain ambiguously unidentified, serving as stand-ins for wherever the viewer imagines. In addition to actual architectural structures, power lines dominate the skyline, speaking to the necessity of a power source to maintain both analog and digital connections. In the midst of the modern urban landscape, something as archaic as pieces of copper wire hanging from wooden poles seems almost anachronistic, but, literally and metaphorically, the power source is the foundation for the



Figure 1

J. David West, *Conversations with Berners-Lee (I & II)*, Serigraph, 22 X 30 in., 2009.

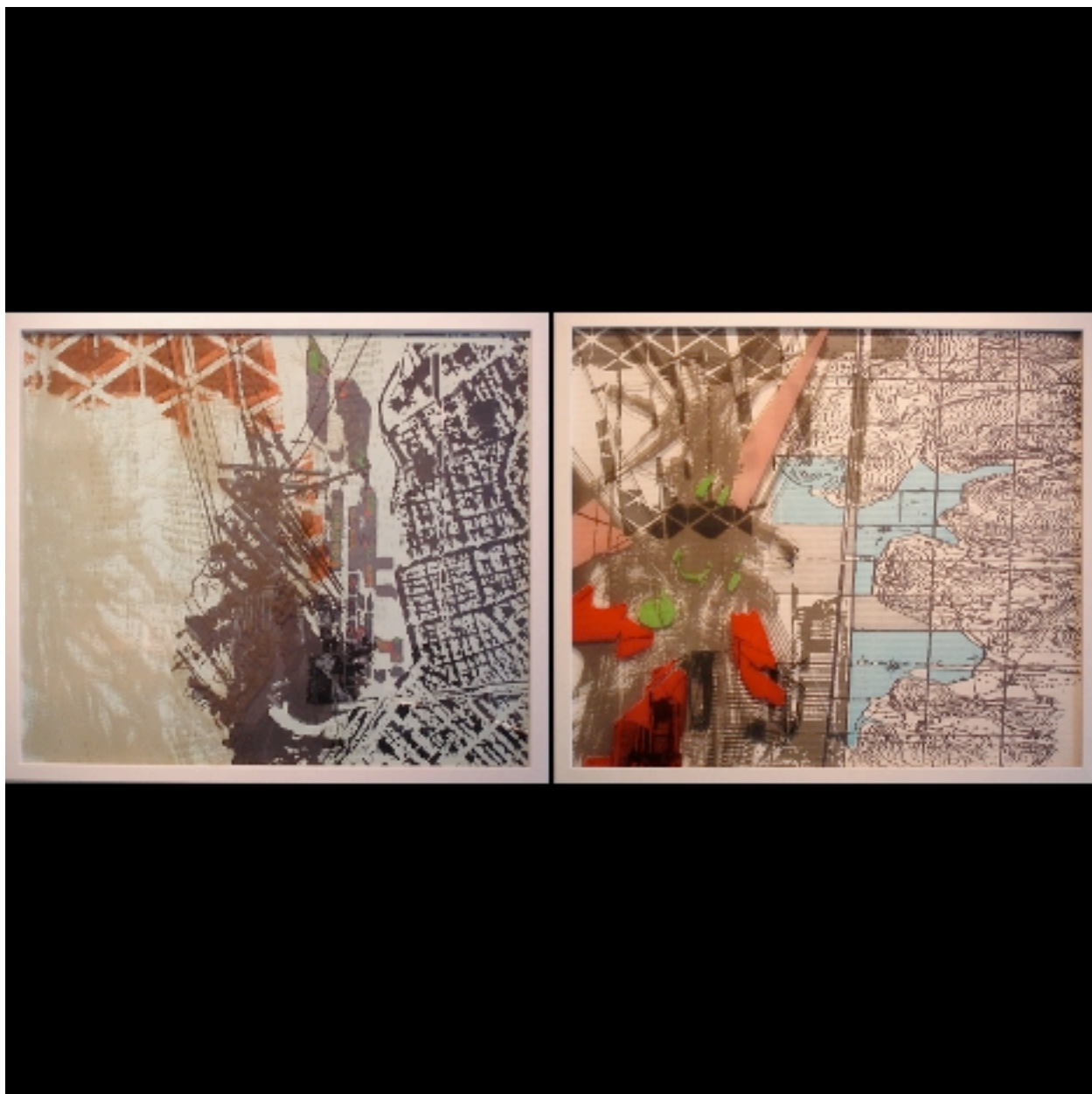


Figure 2

J. David West, *Chiba City (I & II)*, Mixed Media, 36 X 42 in., 2009.

whole web; from the newest and most advanced of computing machines to the practically archaic light bulb, from the traditional woodcut to the digitally projected environment, the wooden electric power pole anchors and brings together the old and new worlds.

Interspersed with the structural elements in the pieces are satellite images of maps. These maps were all appropriated from online sources and depict mainly dense urban centers, but the idea of the map is more important than the actual location it represents. David Greenhood, in his book *Mapping*, talks about the necessity of a map being “a simile or a metaphor” in order to share its knowledge, stating that “a map has as much right to be figurative as spoken or written language has,” (X). Technology has given maps a renewed importance in the modern age. While internet users have access to the remotest of locations with only a few mouse clicks, they also encounter overwhelming amounts of information about a locale. Paradoxically, digital maps have made the world a smaller place at the same time that they have made it seem unbelievably vast. The initial inspiration for the map locales seen in the prints was taken from the text of *Neuromancer*, a tech-heavy novel written by William Gibson, based partly in the port of Chiba City, Japan (the term cyberspace was coined in this book as well as the prediction of numerous other internet/technology concepts). The other map locales are centered around either Tokyo or San Francisco, both seats of technological innovation and progress. Like the buildings, these maps are layered within the prints, but their recognizable geography is not essential: for example, in *Digital Sprawl 00110001 & 00110010* (Figs. 3 & 4), mapping itself serves as a metaphor for a place, and though the images are derived from real cartographies, the identifying details are subsumed by the larger pictures.



Figure 3

J. David West, *Digital Sprawl I*, Mixed Media, 36 X 72 in., 2009.

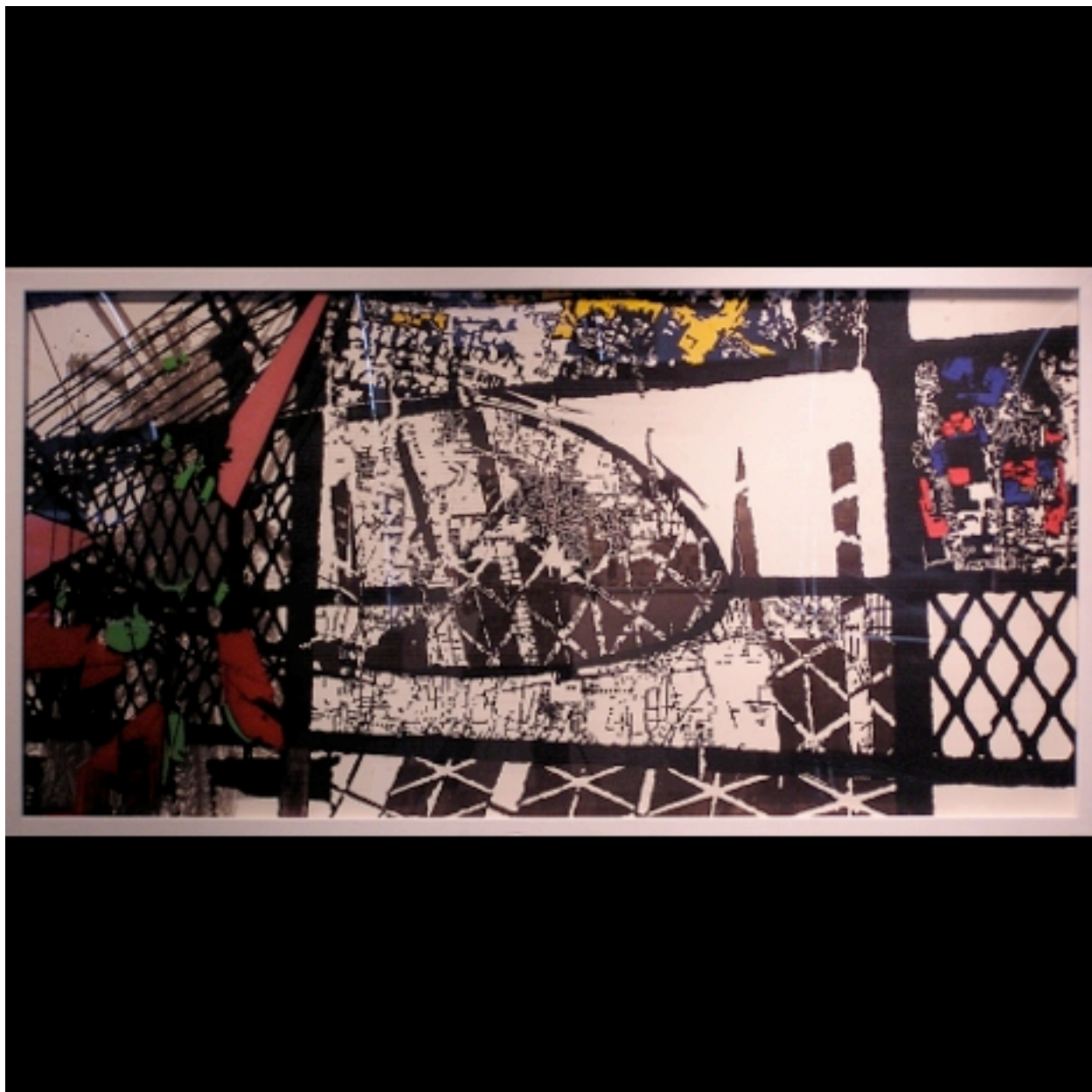


Figure 4

J. David West, *Digital Sprawl II*, Mixed Media, 36 X 72 in., 2009.

While images of structures and maps dominate the visual landscape of each print, samples of binary code (the simplest machine language based on the numerals 1 and 0) and ASCII (an early coding standard using English words) reside almost invisibly beneath or rest faintly on top of the larger, bolder elements. The codes are placed either as the base or the very top layer of the images, printed as the background or onto the surface of the plexiglass or vellum. When situated on the bottom, it acts as the foundation, only peeking through at random intervals. When the code is printed on the surface of the plexiglass or vellum, it is largely transparent, a virtual non-entity, acting as a pattern or rhythm to be looked through. The distinctiveness of the code is in its ability to not interfere with the rest of the work, silently allowing the image to exist around it, mirroring the role that computer code plays in our daily lives.

While code acts as a pictorial element in the hand-pulled prints, it serves as the actual source for the digital space in the gallery. Just as a woodblock acts as a matrix I manipulate to produce a print on paper, computer code is the matrix that I manipulate to produce a program that is stored on a computer's hard drive, allowing for infinite duplications. In this way, computer code can be perceived as the perfect print matrix, infinitely and perfectly replicable. For the last component of the show, I created a digital work, a pair of "prints" that use code as their matrix. Eduardo Kac, in an interview distinguishes between images "that are created in real time (e.g. video)" from static images by claiming that "this new kind of image gives priority to speed over space, to the virtual over the real, and therefore transforms our notion of reality from something given to a construct" (54). In the traditional prints in the show, I am presenting a "given," a known quantity in framed art in a gallery. In the same space, in the pieces *Shift Into Place 00110001 & 00110010*, I am constructing an area that gives precedence to "the virtual over

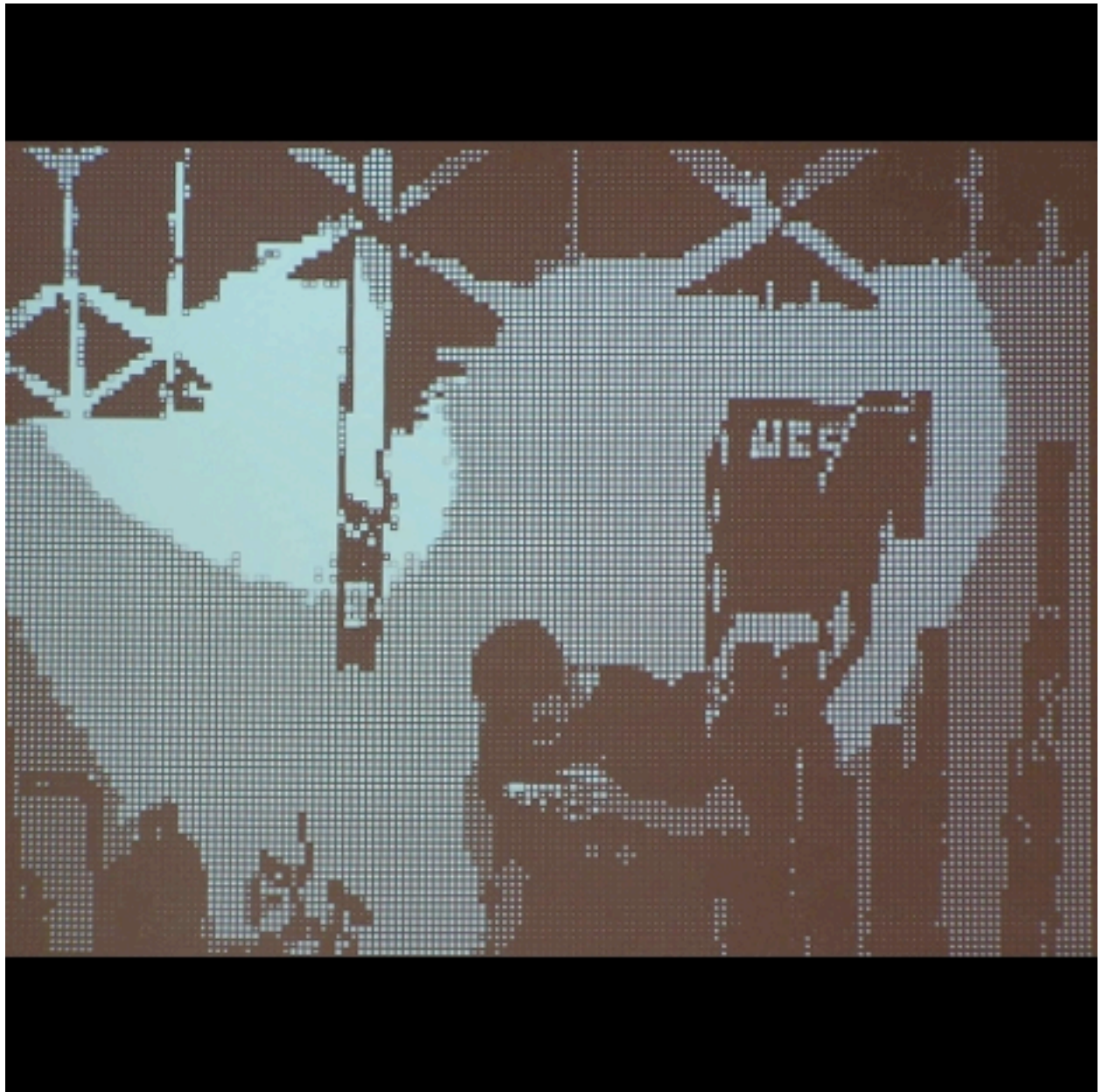


Figure 5

J. David West, *Shift Into Place I*, Digital Projection, 5' X 10', 2009.

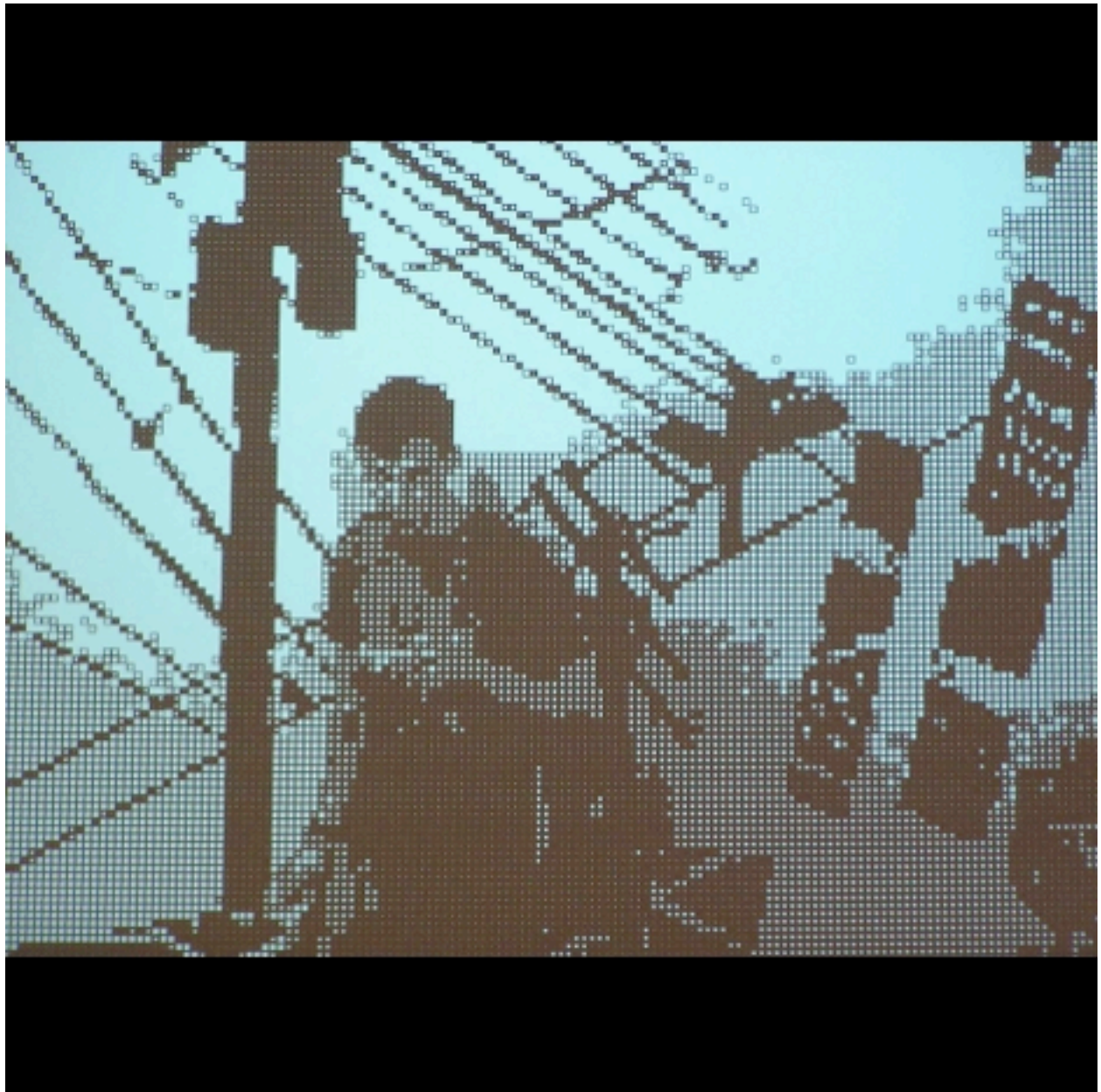


Figure 6

J. David West, *Shift Into Place II*, Digital Projection, 5' X 10', 2009.

the real.” For these pieces I used the free open source software platform, Processing, to construct two programs that translate the viewer into a virtual gallery environment. The programs do this by interpreting a live video feed into a starkly graphic, flattened, pixelated image. The result of these programs’ operations are then projected onto an opposing wall. By creating wall-drawings opposite the projections, I confront and enclose the viewer in an analog and digital space, which is built from the same basis as the traditional prints. The computer program puts the viewer into a virtual print by flattening the image of the viewer against this backdrop, at the same time creating an image that is in constant flux by continuously moving the pixels. At a lecture that Vito Acconci gave at LSU in 2008, he said, “Art has viewers. Designers and architects have participants, users, and inhabitants.” These pieces, then, allow for virtual interaction within a space of my own design, taking the viewers of the traditional prints, and turning them into participants in a virtual space. The juxtaposition of digital and analog worlds is evident within the environments created by these pieces as well as in the two ways audiences will experience the show.

The layout of the gallery itself also represents this hybridity. The area created by the digital works are situated on the right side of the gallery, framed by the largest of the two traditional prints making a space that is partly digital and partly analog. The rest of the gallery is comprised of the remaining analog images, shifting the viewer back into a more traditional gallery experience, highlighting the separation of the two forms of art. The experience is intended to be one of associations by leading the viewer to ask questions about place and location and the infiltration of technology into realms that have long been held by traditional media.

The idea that art has been changed by and continues to be affected by technology is not a new one. Artists have historically been early adopters of new techniques and tools that make their processes easier and their concepts clearer. In that sense, this show reflects a long tradition. As I worked simultaneously with traditional and modern techniques and tools, the possibilities and merits of both stood out. Traditional techniques are still treasured due to the continued value of the handcrafted object in our society and the impact that these unique creations continue to carry. A benefit of the use of digital technologies by the artist is such that interactivity and real-time feedback with and from the viewers and their surroundings provides a level of intimacy and participation with the viewer that is unique. When I began this project, I expected to feel pulled more towards one medium or the other. At the end of this project, I am still waiting for that pull. This show is the first step towards the marriage of these worlds in my work; an artistic Chimera. The questions that I started with at the outset of this project I have only just begun to answer. The process of constructing this show has cemented the inherent values of the individual mediums, but not led me to prefer one over the other. I look forward to witnessing the interaction of the viewers/participants during the course of the show to see if there is a particular attraction for one medium over the other. However, my inclination for my future work lies towards allowing the two different media to continue to dialogue with one another, working together to create a more integrated artistic environment for the modern viewer.

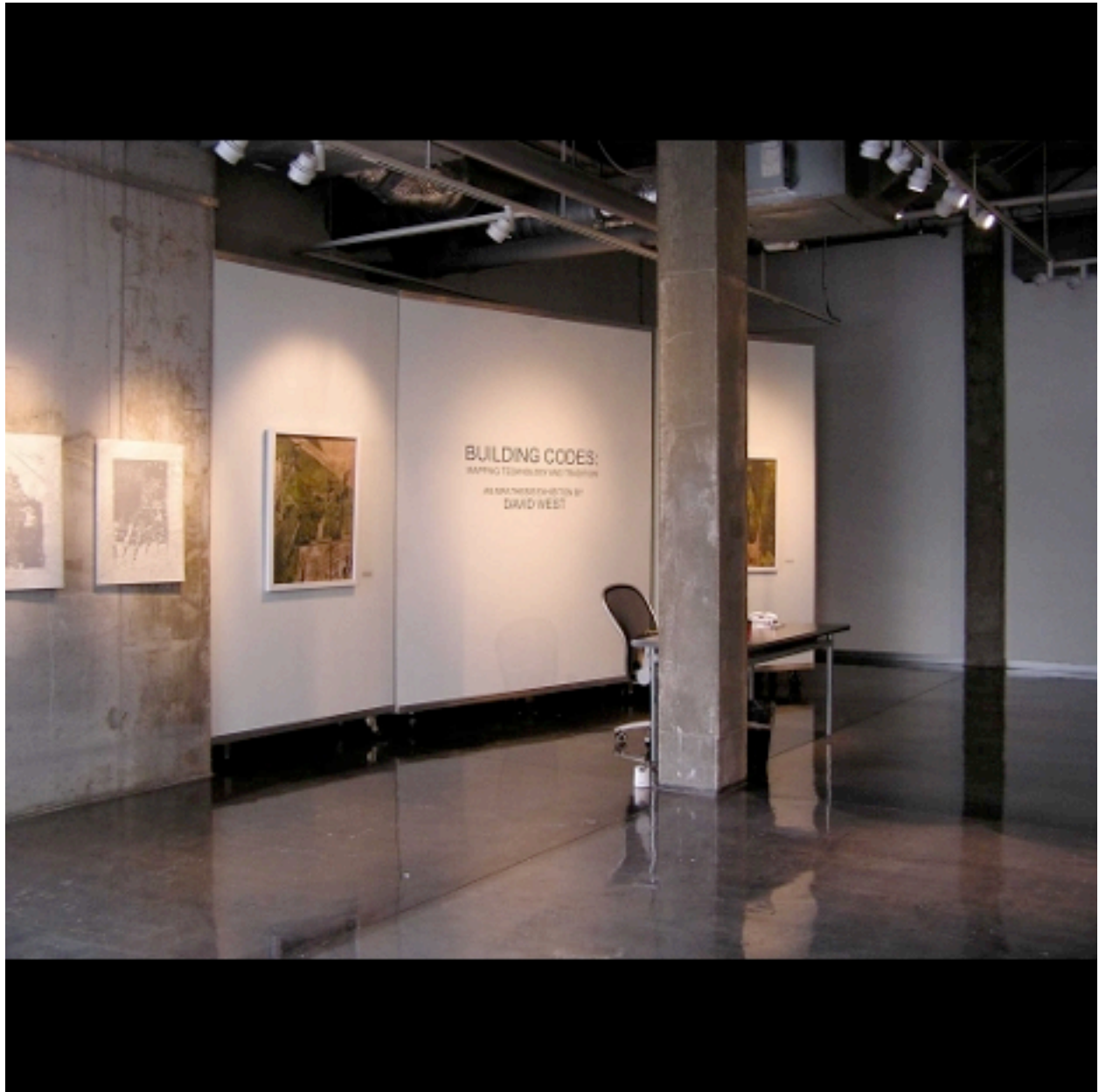
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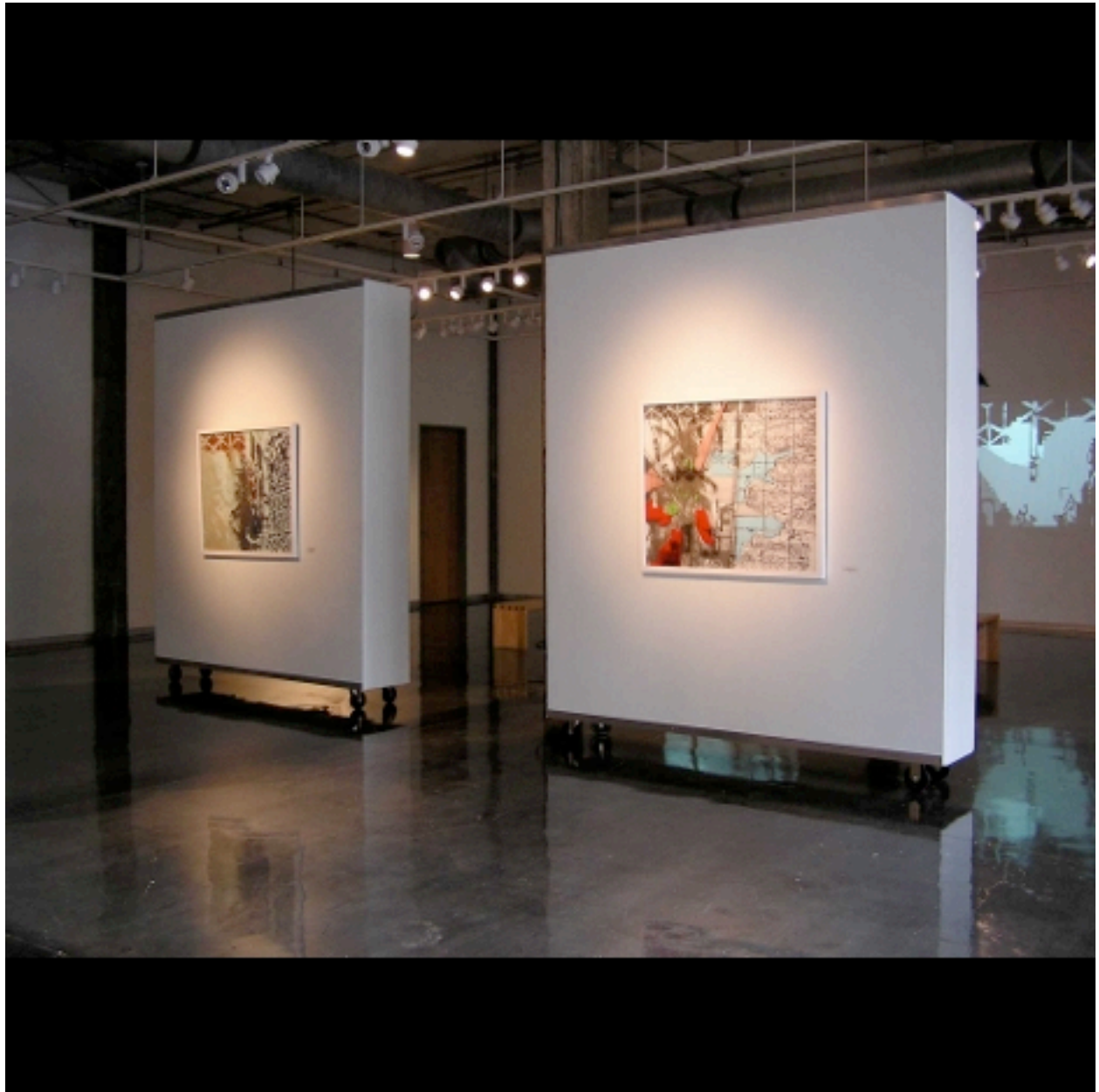
APPENDIX: INSTALLATION IMAGES



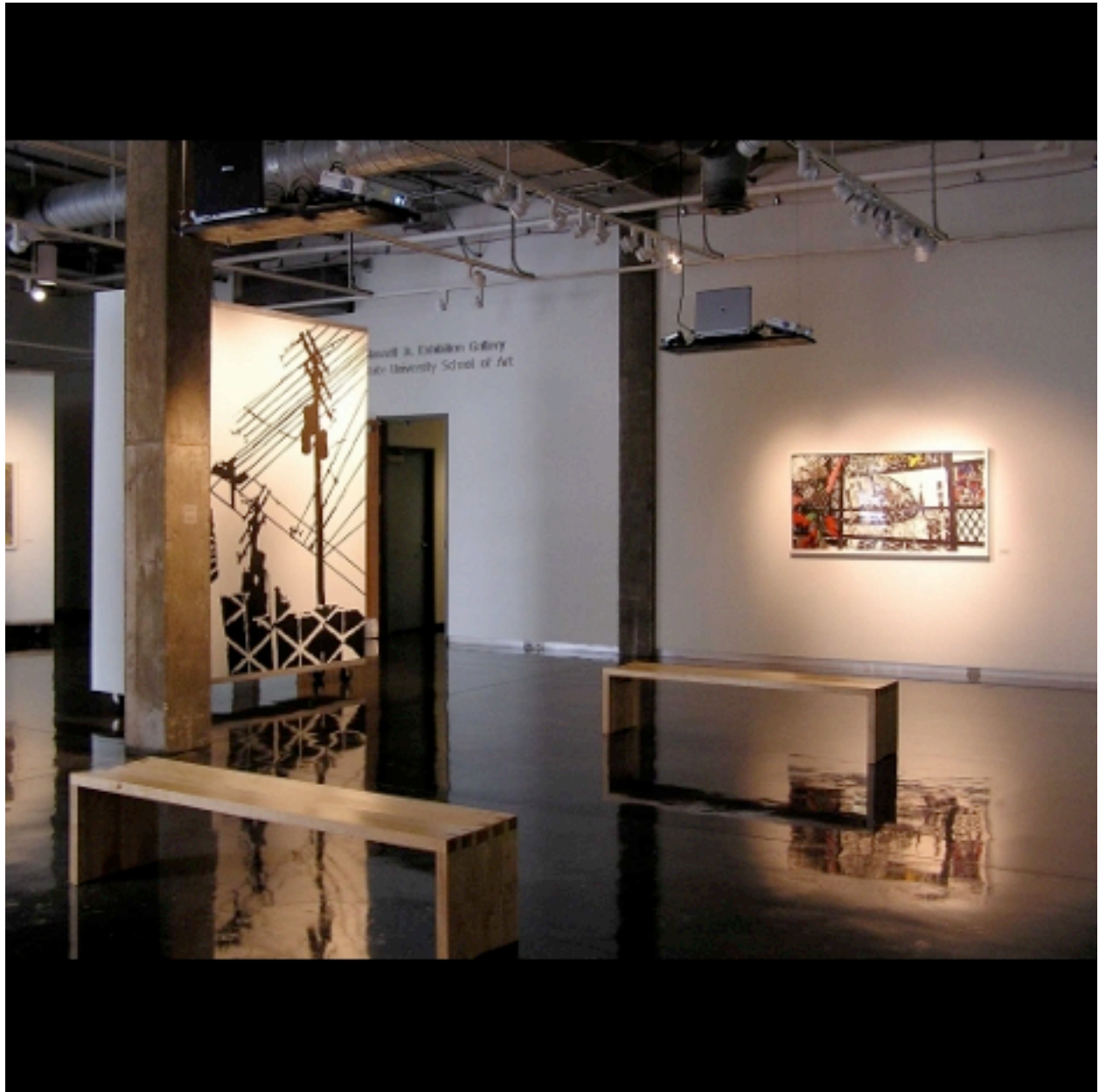
Installation view



Installation view



Installation view



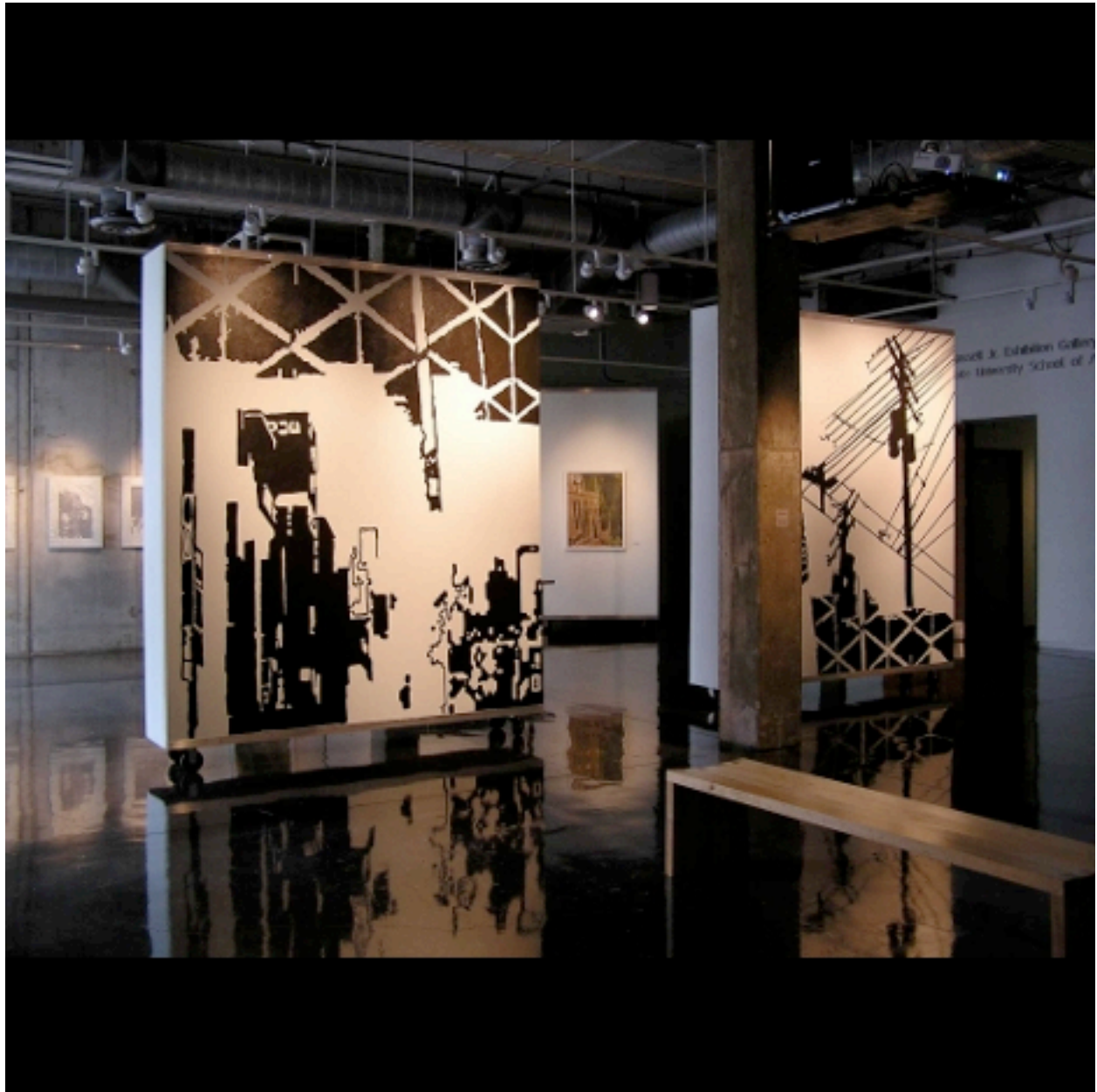
Installation view



Installation view



Installation view



Installation view

VITA

James David West was born and raised in Brookhaven, Mississippi. He received his Bachelor of Arts from Mississippi College where he also met his wife. He taught high school and worked with amputees before coming back to school. While enrolled in the graduate printmaking program at Louisiana State University he and his wife, Jennifer, welcomed their daughter Josephine, into their household. The cats were not amused, but Jennifer and David have been having the time of their lives ever since.